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AUTHOR	Olson, David H.
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ABSTRACT

The theoretical concept of the double bind and the possibilities for researching it are discussed. The author has observed that theory and research, which should be reciprocal and mutually beneficial, have been working, as concerns the double bind, at odds with one another. Two approaches to empirically investigating the concept are considered via a review of the pertinent literature. The first is concerned with translating the phenomena into a valid operational form which can be studied; and the second is concerned with determining if schizophrenics are less able to discriminate double bind messages than other individuals. The author concludes that, generally, the reviewed studies have not provided a good test of the double bind. He does, however, note the two most significant among them, viz.: (1) Mehrabian and Weiner; and (2) Ringuette and Kennedy. He stresses the immediate need for further research which would help limit, clarify and operationalize the tenets of the theory and, resultantly, make it capable of empirical validation. (TL)

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Empirically Unbinding the Double Bind*

David H. Olson**

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It is truly ironic that those investigating the concept of the double bind have themselves been caught in a double bind. Let me describe more specifically the "double bind" that investigators of the concept have been caught in and how they might escape from this situation. In the original double bind article (Bateson, et al, 1956), the following three conditions were defined as creating a double bind situation. First, "the individual is involved in an intense relationship; that is, a relationship in which he feels it is vitally important that he discriminate accurately what sort of message is being communicated so that he may respond appropriately" (p. 254). Truly, a person doing research on the double bind is in a situation that demands that he discriminate accurately what is being said by the theorists so that he can interpret and, thereby, investigate the concept appropriately.

The second condition states that: "the individual is caught in a situation in which the other person in the relationship is expressing two orders of message and one of these denies the other" (p. 254). The theorists are first of all saying on one level that the concept need not be tested because it is self-validating. In this regard, Bateson in 1966 stated that: "the theory itself is highly abstract and, to this extent, is itself likely to be self-validating....It thus becomes excessively

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** David H. Olson, Ph.D., Family Development Section, Child Research Branch, NIMH, Building 15K, Bethesda, Maryland 20014

CG 005 676

difficult to test the premises or the theory against empirical fact....Personally I do not believe that the theory is at present subject to rigorous empirical testing....At best it can be vividly exemplified or illustrated by the phenomena of schizophrenia, humor, religion, art, and the like" (p. 416-7). On a second level, however, there is the implicit message that more and better empirical research should be done to test and validate the concept. In summary, the second condition for a double bind has been created for on one level there are explicit statements that the concept cannot be empirically investigated and at the same time an implicit message on the second level that empirical research should attempt to validate the double bind hypothesis.

The <u>third</u> and final condition for the situation to be binding is that: "the individual is unable to comment on the messages being expressed to correct his discrimination of what order of message to respond to, i.e., he cannot make a metacommunicative statement" (p. 254). It is at this point that one can see the possibility of escaping from the double bind situation. First let me paraphrase the defensive reactions of schizophrenics as described by the theorists. One could respond as a paranoid schizophrenic and react to this situation in a defensive manner to see how the situation is constructed to destroy him. Or one could laugh off the double bind situation as a hebephrenic does, or ignore the situation and withdraw like a catatonic. However, as postulated by the double bind hypothesis, these types of reactions to double bind situations are precisely the reason why schizophrenia developed and continues to persist. Other possible reactions to this double bind situation include reacting to only one of the messages and, thereby, either proceed on the

assumption that valid research is desired or accept the statement that it is impossible to test the concept. Another alternative is to respond with incongruent messages that create further double binds. The most reasonable reaction, however, is to unbind the situation by metacommunicating, i.e. communicating about the communication. More specifically, this means that one makes an explicit comment about the mutually exclusive messages and requests clarification. This is what I hope that we will be able to do this afternoon.

According to the original hypothesis advanced by Bateson and his associates in 1956, one would conceive of this double bind situation as one in which the research investigators are the "victims." But in accord with a revised conceptualization of the double bind proposed by Watzlawick, there is no binder and bound but rather two victims. This latter formulation is a more accurate description of what has happened in the relationship between the theorists and the research investigators. The two victims in this case are those who have developed the concept and are hoping for empirical support and those investigating the concept empirically who have had a difficult time operationalizing the concept and have been unable to find such empirical support.

Ideally, the relationship between theory and research should be one which is reciprocal and mutually beneficial. Theoretical formulations, such as the double bind, should direct one to yet unobserved phenomena and relationships and stimulate research in these areas. Research ideally should insure that these formulations are operationalized and then systematically test the postulated relationships. If the hypotheses are not supported, the findings should then be used in reformulating and

refocusing the theory. Unfortunately, the two groups have been working with little apparent concern for the developments of each other. Hence, rather than mutual gains, both have become victims of the very concept, the double bind, they have attempted to investigate.

Review of Literature

It might prove helpful to review what has been found by those who have attempted to investigate the concept empirically. The first and foremost task of research is to translate the phenomena into some type of operational form which can be studied, without altering the nature of the concept so as to make the research irrelevant to the theory. This is a deceptively simple task, as was found by Mishler and Waxler (1968) in their intensive study of family interaction in schizophrenics. After attempting to investigate the double bind hypotheses, they reluctantly concluded that: "We were not able to develop a direct measure of double binds because there seemed no way of establishing clear criteria consistent with the original definition. At best we were able to indicate that certain comparisons, such as between results for direct and indirect measure of affect, seemed not to be inconsistent with the idea. However, this did not permit using our results as a direct test of the hypothesis that the patient families would show a higher rate of double binds" (p. 274). They further stated that in regard to the double bind: "there is a lack of precision and clarity...that presents serious difficulties for an accurate understanding of the types of interaction sequences that do and do not fall within the definition of the double bind. From the way the concept is used, it sometimes appears that all communication sequences may be interpretable at some levels of analysis, as double binds, and, if this be so, the concept

loses all usefulness" (p. 15). Bateson (1966) also acknowledges that: "They say with some justice that the phrasings of the theory are sometimes ambiguous. They might have gone further and said that (like much of psychoanalytic theory) the double bind theory of schizophrenia is slippery--so slippery that perhaps no imaginable set of empirical facts could contradict it" (p. 415).

In spite of this serious difficulty in attempting to investigate this concept, several studies have attempted to test the validity of this phenomena. Although numerous publications have been devoted to illustrative case descriptions and therapeutic uses of the concept, only empirical studies will be reviewed in this paper. Basically, there are two types of empirical studies which have attempted to investigate the double bind. One approach has attempted to assess the extent to which the parents of schizophrenics send double bind messages. They have predicted these parents will create more double bind situations than will parents of other children. The second approach has been to determine the schizophrenics' ability to discriminate double bind messages and has predicted they would do poorer than other groups. In general, these empirical studies have failed to develop a conceptual or operational scheme which accurately reflects the double bind hypothesis. In fact, several studies which purported to measure the double bind used measures which seem to have little relationship to the original concept. In addition, these studies often have numerous methodological problems which make the studies even more difficult to interpret. With these ideas in mind, let.us review these empirical investigations.

There are several studies which have attempted to assess whether parents of schizophrenics create more double binds than other parents. Beavers and his associates (1965) interviewed nine mothers of hospitalized schizophrenic patients and nine mothers of non-schizophrenic patients in order to test the hypothesis that the schizophrenic mothers would communicate feelings in a more ambiguous manner. The taped interviews were transcribed and scored for the number of definite responses, evasions and shifts of meaning. The two groups were found to be significantly different on all three variables with the control group having a higher number of definite responses whereas the mothers of the schizophrenics had significantly more shifts and evasions. Combining the number of shifts and evasions it was possible to clearly differentiate the two groups. These findings indicate that mothers of schizophrenics do communicate in a more illusive fashion as might be deduced from the double bind hypothesis. However, the conceptual leap from counting the number of shifts and evasions as adequate measures of the double bind is questionable.

One study which came closer conceptually to measuring double binds was done by Berger (1965). He developed a questionnaire which was composed of 30 double bind statements. Subjects were asked to rate each statement on a four point scale in terms of how frequently they recalled their mother made these comments. The four groups of subjects consisted of diagnosed schizophrenics and three control groups, i.e., patients not diagnosed as schizophrenic, hospital attendents and kitchen personnel and a group of college students. All groups were composed of white males between the ages of 16 and 35. The schizophrenic group was found to consistently have a higher score than the control groups but a significant difference was found

only between the schizophrenic group and the college students. This study, however, has the serious shortcoming that it asked subjects to recall the extent to which these statements were made by their mothers. Research by Yarrow, Campbell, and Burton (1964, 1968) Kenkel (1963), Haggard (1960), and Robbins (1963) have indicated the serious inadequacy of the retrospective method so as to invalidate this study.

A more rigorous test of a similar hypothesis was done by Beakel and Mehrabian (1969). They videotaped the parent-child interaction in five families with a mildly disturbed adolescent and five families with a severely disturbed adolescent. They then compared what the parents communicated verbally with what they communicated non-verbally, i.e., posturally. While it was predicted according to the double bind hypothesis that the parents of the severely disturbed child would exhibit more statements in which the messages were in conflict, this hypothesis was not supported. But the groups were significantly different in that the parents of the severely disturbed children communicated significantly more negative feelings.

Lastly, a study by Ringuette and Kennedy (1966) provides one of the most rigorous tests of the hypothesis. Previous research by Weakland and Fry (1962) indicated that letters from mothers of schizophrenics to their child contained good samples of double bind messages. Ringuette and Kennedy, therefore, attempted to determine if persons with varying amounts of experience with the double bind concept were able to reliably rate double bind messages contained in letters. Twenty letters were obtained from hospitalized schizophrenic patients which they had received from their parents, 20 letters from parents of non-schizophrenic patients and 20

letters written by hospital volunteers as if they were writing to a hospitalized child. Five types of judges were used and they included: (1) an expert group that was closely involved in the development of the concept; (2) a group of psychiatric residents trained in the double bind; (3) experienced clinicians untrained on the double bind; (4) experienced clinicians trained on the double bind; and (5) a naive group untrained in the social sciences. Each group was composed of three individuals that were asked to rate the 60 letters on a seven point scale representing the degree of double bind contained in each letter. Not only did these groups of judges fail to agree among themselves, but none of the groups of judges were able to differentiate between the letters received by schizophrenics and non-schizophrenic patients. In addition, the experts and trained group also failed to differentiate between the volunteer and patient letters, although this was done by the other three groups of judges. The findings also very clearly demonstrated that there was considerable difficulty in identifying double binds, for the average interjudge reliabilities were consistently very low; i.e., expert group = .19; trained resident group = .26; untrained clinicians = .13; trained clinicians = .44; and naive group = .39. The failure of the experts to agree posses a serious question regarding the conceptual definition of the double bind. The writers concluded that the reasons for such negative findings indicate that: "(a) double bind communication is not present in letters, in which case a postulate of the theory is clearly invalid; (b) it is not presently a measurable phenomenon; (c) it actually does not exist" (p. 141).

In summarizing these four studies, two studies (Beaver, 1965; Berger, 1965) are difficult to interpret because of conceptual and methodological

weaknesses and the other two studies (Beakel and Mehrabian, 1969; Ringuette and Kennedy, 1966) failed to support the idea that parents of more disturbed individuals send more double bind messages than other parents.

The second approach empirical investigators have taken to test the double bind hypothesis has been to determine if schizophrenics themselves are less able to discriminate double bind messages compared to other individuals. One of the first to attempt to test this hypothesis was Ciotola (1961) in which schizophrenics and a control group were compared on their reaction time to the discrimination of auditory tones when the task was made virtually impossible. Although it was hypothesized that schizophrenics would show longer reaction times, it was not supported. There is, however, some question whether this is conceptually a very valid test of the double bind hypothesis. In this regard, Watzlawick (1963) has stated in criticizing a parallel research study with rats in which an ellipse is gradually made more circular and a circle more elliptical so that discrimination of the two is impossible that: "The double bind is <u>not</u> a failure in discrimination" (p. 137). Secondly, there is some question whether the hypothesis that schizophrenics would have a longer reaction time can be legitimately predicted from the double bind phenomena.

Another ostensible study of the double bind hypothesis was done by Potash (1965) in which he utilized the prisoner's dilemma situation in a two person three-choice game. Subjects were male schizophrenics and a matched control group composed of hospital employees. It was hypothesized that the schizophrenics would make more withdrawal responses to the game such that they would not take the risk of maximizing their gain. Contrary to what they hypothesized, the schizophrenic group did not show increased

withdrawal responses to the double-bind task. Again, the conceptual relationship of the prisoner's dilemma task for testing the double bind is not clear. This was more a study of trust and cooperation in a game situation than a direct test of other double bind hypothesis.

A more rigorous test of the double bind hypothesis was done by Loeff (1965). He tape recorded 24 happy and 24 unhappy statements in which the affect was varied in three ways to represent: (1) neutral affect; (2) appropriate affect, and (3) conflicting affect. Subjects were 24 normal, 24 delinquent and 24 reactive schizophrenic adolescent girls. The subjects rated each statement on a scale indicating the degree of agreement between the voice and content, completed a sincerity scale and a semantic differential scale. It was found that all three groups were equally able to discriminate the conflicting messages. However, the pathological groups were more affected by both the content and affect aspects of the communication whereas the control group tended to miss (i.e. avoid, repress) the conflicting messages and placed greater emphasis on the content component. These findings do not support the double bind formulation which predicts less discrimination by pathological groups.

However, results from a somewhat related study by Mehrabian and Weiner (1967) did not replicate Loeff's findings that normal subjects place greater emphasis on the content component of messages. Mehrabian and Weiner investigated the relative influence of the content and tone of communication in a normal sample. One group of 10 subjects heard only the content component in which the main vocal frequencies were blocked out. Another group of 10 heard the tonal component but the content was unintelligible. The third group of 10 heard both the content and tonal

components. They found that when the two components were both positive or both negative, the total message was judged more positive or more negative than when either the content or tonal component were judged separately. However, contrary to what Loeff found, when the two components were discrepant, the vocal component played by far the most prominent role in the determination of the final message received. So, for example, when a negative tone was used to present a positive word such as "dear," the total message was evaluated negatively.

Not only does this study by Mehrabian and Weiner lead one to question the study by Loeff, but it also seriously questions two basic assumptions of the double bind hypothesis. According to their interpretation of the double bind hypothesis, it was first of all assumed that inconsistent components of a message are decoded separately. Secondly, it was assumed that responding to the two conflicting messages is what creates the double bind. The results of their study, however, do not support either of these assumptions. They found that inconsistent components in a message are not decoded separately but in a wholistic manner such that if the tonal and content aspects are in conflict, the tonal component determines the final message. For example, praising a person in a negative tone, such as in saying "Thanks a lot," communicates a negative message, i.e., sarcasm. It should be remembered, however, that this research was not done with schizophrenics and so this study should be replicated with a patient population.

Three of the four studies just described did not provide an adequate test of the hypothesis that schizophrenics have greater difficulty identifying double binds. The studies by Ciotola (1961) and Potash (1965)

used research methods which do not adequately relate conceptually to the double bind phenomena and the study by Mehrabian and Weiner (1967) used only normal subjects. The only study that did adequately test the hypothesis that schizophrenics have greater difficulty discriminating double bind messages was done by Loeff (1965) and his study did not support the hypothesis.

Concluding Comments

In summary, this review of the research literature has revealed that the present studies have not provided a very good test of the double bind. In addition to the many methodological problems in these studies, most of them failed to develop a conceptual or operational scheme which accurately reflected the double bind phenomenon. By the time the concept was operationalized and an instrument was devised to measure it, the final measure had little resemblence to the actual double bind phenomenon. So while the results are generally negative, the double bind still has not been very rigorously tested.

There are two studies, however, that are particularly significant because they do provide the most rigorous tests of the double bind to date. First there is the study by Mehrabian and Weiner (1967) which challenges the assumption of the double bind that conflicting components of a message are interpreted separately, thereby creating a double bind. They found, however, that when they presented conflicting message components to normal subjects, the final message communicated was not conflicting and confusing.

The second study which bears further attention is by Ringuette and Kennedy's (1966) in which they found that there was very little agreement

among various groups of individuals who had varying amounts of experience with the concept. Because of this finding, it is not at all surprising to find that in most of the empirical studies cited, a fundamental problem was in attempting to conceptualize or operationalize the double bind. In addition, others, such as Mishler and Waxler, who have tried to utilize the concept in research have had such difficulty operationalizing it that they did not incorporate it into their study. The predominant difficulty with the present formulation of the double bind is that it remains so abstract that it is elusive. Abstractness is a necessary component of a theorectical formulation, but abstractness must also have operational relationships to natural situations to be useful. As Muzafer Sherif (1966) stated in an address to graduate students: "If divorced from actualities, abstraction becomes a game; it...becomes inner gymnastics for a select group of people who are 'in' on the secret and exclusive lingo" (1966, p.4). It appears that at this time, the double bind continues to be a concept that even the 'in' group has difficulty agreeing upon; as indicated in the research by Ringuette and Kennedy where the reliability among the experts was indeed, very low. To retreat to the psychologizing of Charlie Brown, one might, not too inappropriately, respond to the double bind concept the same way that Lucy does to Charlie Brown; "You're a good concept, double bind, if only you weren't so wishy-washy."

Now let us return to the double bind situation created for those who have attempted to empirically unbind the concept. The investigators of the double bind have discharged part of their responsibility and at the same time escaped from a potential double bind by metacommunicating. That is, they have communicated about the communication regarding the double bind,

both by word and deed. Their responsibility does not end there however, since the research has primarily only indicated that the concept is difficult to investigate. Once the double bind becomes more clarified, investigators need to be more careful and creative in their attempts to develop adequate measures of the double bind. Future investigators should also pay greater attention to the other methodological problems which have not been adequately dealt with in the previous studies. In other words, investigators have proceeded with some vigor to study the double bind and they should now proceed with greater vigor.

In concluding this review, it is apparent that the double bind has generated considerable interest. It is, however, still a hypothesis in the process of being more fully defined and refined. It is precisely at this point in time that constructive criticism should be directed at the research and the present state of the concept. In fact, when the concept is still being developed, it is even more important that the theorists have reliable empirical findings to further clarify and refine the theory. I, therefore, conclude as did Schuman in his review of the double bind: "It is apparent that not until the tenents of the theory have been further limited, clarified, and operationalized will be it become a reliable phenomenon capable of empirical validation" (p. 415). It is only then that it will be possible to empirically unbind the double bind.

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